

“The Rocky Shores of Memory” by Paul Boothby

Sermon delivered by Tom Moffit

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I transferred to College of the Atlantic to save the planet. After a year of indecision, I felt a sense of purpose. I wanted to put an end to the cultural desert of suburban sprawl as I had seen it in Fairfax County, and to the scofflaw polluters like Ciba-Geigy corporation, and the Frankensteinian manipulators of agriculture like Monsanto. I felt like “Don Quixote de la Sierra Club.”

As it turned out, my idealism was no match for the scale of that task and I soon felt overwhelmed. In the face of all that had been lost—the deforestation, the depletion of the oceans, the paving of the land, the loss of species diversity, and also the momentum of the human hunger to consume, not just the seven billion mouths to feed, but the billions of egos that seemed to have bottomless desires... in the face of all this, I was bewildered. How could my meager efforts have any real impact?

It was about this time that I found hope in a story written by Loren Eiseley, the story of the star thrower; you may remember this tale from our celebration last October. It is the story of a casual stroll along the beach, gazing down at the sand and noticing the many starfish that had been left ashore by the receding tide. Looking along the beach, our wanderer sees a young boy bending down and picking up one starfish after another and throwing them back out to the open water, as he explained, “else they will surely die.” “But how can the saving of so few make a difference when there are so many thousands stranded on the shore?” At which, the boy picks up another starfish and casts it well out into the tide and says, “It made a difference for that one.”

This story saved me from both my idealism and my pessimism. I learned not to let my desires overreach my capacity to act, and to keep my ambition from the jaws of proportion. I understood that each person’s contribution does make a difference, even if in a small way. So I renewed my commitment to Environmentalism and Education, preaching the good news of our interdependence in the wider web of existence and the human capacity to adapt. I saw minds and hearts transformed as refugees from our consumerist culture waded into the sea of relationship.

But I was young and impatient; the collective urge toward consumerist insanity seemed to be accelerating rather than abating. America was not reducing the demand for natural resources, but jacking it up and finding new ways to tear open the earth for shiny baubles and rare minerals. The focus of our individual and collective lives seemed to be primarily about pleasure and accumulation of stuff. I decided that if we were ever going to see real change in this trend, we would have to do more than educate people about our interdependence, we needed to cure people of their self-centeredness, to free their heart so they could see beyond themselves to the wider world and the wider impact of their actions. To do that, meant helping people to heal from the hurts life had dealt them. But within the context of environmentalism there seemed no mechanism, other than communing with nature for the healing of the human psyche. And while nature can be therapeutic, it does not address the wounds of loss, abandonment and emotional violence.

I contemplated this dilemma walking the rocky shore of Verona Island on the coast of Maine. For generations my family had combed that gravelly beach at the head of Penobscot Bay in search of the odd trinket that may have washed up with the winter storms. It was not a place to find starfish, but what one could find almost every time was sea-glass, that extraordinary treasure formed from the raw material of humanity's refuse, there where the ocean meets the shore. (which reminds me—did you ever notice when scarecrow sings in the Wizard of Oz that he can tell you why the ocean meets the shore, he never actually tells us?)

Sea-glass is treasured by beach combers and embodies a very interesting story. When a bottle breaks on the rocks, the fresh edges are jagged and sharp; and could easily injure anyone who touches it in the wrong way, cutting deep the unwary wanderer.

But over time, with the action of the waves and the gentle tumbling of the surrounding stones, the sharp edges of glass are worn smooth, that broken piece of glass becomes accommodated to its new reality, its new shape. It becomes a pleasure to behold and soothing to hold in the hand for it has gained a unique beauty and embodies its own story.

So too with our emotional wounds, when we are freshly injured by betrayal or loss, the injury may leave sharp edges to our personality—bitterness, spite, selfishness and resentment, injuring the unwary innocent who may cross our path.

Over time, however, if washed by saltwater tears and compassionate understanding, and the gentle abrasion of wisdom's hard lessons, our emotional wounds can also heal, to form a new beauty, embodying our story in the depths of our experience. And then too, our new shape, our experience and understanding becomes a comfort to other people.

From my days leading canoe trips for children along the coast of Maine, we had a saying whenever there was an injury, either physical or emotional, that saltwater could heal all wounds, either the saltwater of the ocean, which was very effective at irrigating and cleansing cuts and abrasions, or the saltwater of tears that allowed the stress of a difficult situation to be expressed and released so that the young camper could grow into the situation with greater understanding and a freer mind.

We also occasionally wondered if we could solve some problems by throwing trouble makers into the saltwater of the ocean, but we decided against that.

So our wounds must be given time to heal, and gentle irrigation to cleanse them of contamination. If you do not cleanse a wound, it may become infected. And so it is with our emotions. If you bind an emotional wound prematurely, cover it up, wrap it in layers of shame where the saltwater of tears can not rinse the debris of regret, it too will fester.

Even in our dreams, the image of water often represents our emotional life. The gentle cleansing of the waters of emotion and the gentle rubbing of compassionate understanding in time will soften the sharp edges of our brokenness. Then we too might be a living testament of the healing power of life, when we allow our pain to be touched by love, when we let it wash over us and flow through us, leaking from our eyes, uniting us with our primordial origins in the sea. Then we might bring forth the fullness of our power, the full resolve of our personhood to give our energy to remake the world so that humans will live in balance with the natural systems that support all life.

It is ever so important that we be able to bring our full selves to the world at this time. The world needs us. There is as much hazard as ever to ecosystems and species and the future happiness of humankind. All our efforts will be needed to heal the world from the damage that has been done.

The lonely star thrower is still doing his part, combing the shore for starfish, and casting them back to safety, but today the starfish are covered with oil. Throwing them back into the sea will not save their lives. The simple solutions are no longer

enough. The difficult questions that we have been putting off for generations are once again being forced upon us.

The lives of animals and the livelihoods of thousands of people are being choked on humanity's incessant appetite for petroleum. The light crude spewing from the floor of the Gulf of Mexico is not so sweet, after all. It is bleeding into the sea of life and drifting onto the sandy shores of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. We did not want to believe that it could happen. Or if we did think it was inevitable, we felt helpless to put a stop to it.

Why did we not change our ways when the Exxon Valdez crashed on the rocky shores of Alaska? Why did America not heed the call 30 years ago when President Carter challenged us to free ourselves from oil?

The temptation to keep the American dream intact, with four SUV's in every garage, 10,000 square feet of air conditioned McMansion for every family and unending inventories of cheap plastic stuff has kept our country in a trance of consumerism where the individual believes himself or herself to be at the center of the world. Ancient religious wisdom and modern scientific evidence agree that this is a sad and dangerous illusion.

The Hindus have taught us that the ego self, our image of who we are is not the ultimate reality of our existence, but the ego as a construct of our perception functions as a veil in front of the deeper self, the Atman, which is co-existent with Brahman—the ultimate ground of being.

So too, the science of ecology has shown us the interdependent nature of all existence. We cannot make demands of one part of the biosphere without putting stress on other parts of the Living System of the Earth, and humanity has been making some very short-sighted and selfish demands on the Great Living System for a very long time.

The good news is that we have stopped ourselves, on occasion, and corrected some of our abuses. We saved the ozone layer from total destruction; we stopped using some of the more lethal inventions like DDT and CFC's. But we have taken only baby steps toward solving the more fundamental issues of our lifestyle. We continue in our collective illusion that human beings are somehow separate and autonomous from the rest of nature, that our little concerns are somehow of ultimate significance.

We have a tremendous amount of unfinished business to attend to, and it will likely not be fully finished in our lifetime. But we must walk the middle way between unrealistic ambition in which we will surely fall short, or passive despondency which prevents us from even trying. We must move forward, with whatever resources we have and continue the work of picking up one starfish at a time, cleansing it of the petroleum choking it of oxygen, and then keep it safe until time and tide and enough of the right kind of bacteria can cleanse the waters polluted by our shared indifference.

We can turn back from this path of mutually assured filth and degradation of our environment. We can make the hard choices and strategic investments to change our lives in the interest of preserving all life.

We are in a cultural struggle, not the culture war that the religious right fabricated, but a struggle between competing visions of the predominant American lifestyle.

This is a struggle between sustainability and business as usual.

It is No-Impact Man versus British Petroleum.

It is small scale farmers versus Monsanto,

It is viable habitat versus suburban sprawl.

These are the days and the years that will ask more of us. We will be asked to choose, to change, to learn and to help each other to overcome our old habits, the old ways that got us into this mess. These are the years that will ask us to hold a more courageous love for all life. Together we can do this, but each of us must answer the question that the great Unitarian Universalist, Pete Seeger used to sing about in the days of the coal miner strikes, "Which side are you on, which side are you on?" Amen.